DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 377 JC 940 097

AUTHOR Prather, George
TITLE The Who, Whom, What, and How of Institutional Accountability.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Community College League of California (Burlingame, CA, November 18-20, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; College Role; Community Colleges; Educational Legislation; Educational Policy; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Needs; *Evaluation Problems; Models; Outcomes of Education; Role of Education; School Community Relationship; School Effectiveness; *Self Evaluation (Groups); *Statewide Planning; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *California Community Colleges

ABSTRACT

An accountability model for the California community colleges must be based on an extensive discussion of precisely who is being held accountable, to whom are they responsible, what are they responsible for, and how will such responsibility be enforced. In developing its model, the Assembly Bill 1725 Accountability Task Force of the California community colleges defined accountability as a condition rather than a relationship and gave short shrift to the specification of expectations, focusing instead on the enumeration of indicators and the communication of evidence. The California community colleges are accountable not only to state government and to local district authorities, but to students, employers (of graduates), articulated institutions and programs, and to each other. With respect to the issue of who is being held accountable, a true accountability model would enable voters to hold elected officials responsible for the performance of community colleges in the same way that administrators are responsible to elected leaders. Regarding the question of what institutions are responsible for, outcomes rather than processes must be the primary medium of exchange in an accountability system. Among the five components of the Task Force's accountability system (i.e., student access, student success, student satisfaction, staff composition, and fiscal condition), only student success appears to be a truly first order outcome. With respect to the how of accountability enforcement, a mission-driven system must be created to replace the rule-driven system implicit in the present Task Force's accountability model. (PAA)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 366 377

Office of Research and Planning

# THE WHO, WHOM, WHAT, AND HOW OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

George Prather, Ph.D.
Senior Research Analyst

Presented at the 1993 Annual Convention
of the Community College League of California
Burlingame, California

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Prather

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

JC940097

November, 1993

Educational Services Division
Los Angeles Community College District



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

# THE WHO, WHOM, WHAT, AND HOW OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

## Introduction

Many of us received a draft of the Accountability Indicators Report prepared by the Chancellor's Office in February 1993[1]. My own reaction was "this looks like the same old thing we've been doing all along dressed in somewhat new clothing" and this seemed to reflect the feelings of others that I talked to at that point. In an internal memo at the time, I wrote:

> I've looked over the Accountability Indicators Report from the State Chancellor's Office, and it seems to me that there are substantial problems with it as it stands now. The five areas of Student Access, Student Success, Student Satisfaction, Staff Composition and Fiscal Condition are a pretty good way of grouping obtainable indicators which do relate to institutional effectiveness. But there are points at which the effort becomes somewhat muddled. The result, I fear, will be a sort of "virtual" data book--that is, one more listing of the figures with no context nor norms even while it claims to be providing this.

One could go on to point out that most of the proposed indicators are from data we are already reporting under the Management Information System of the Chancellor's Office, and, in fact, most were reported under the previous data system as well. The cumulative result was a feeling of letdown. A promising initiative designed to get us to look at the **results,** not just the effort and processes of our institutions, was being implemented in a way which would render it harmless to the established patterns, and ultimately mind numbing to anyone who would attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of California community colleges either singly or as a group.

This complaint is, to be sure, a cheap shot. For one, everyone involved has insisted that the additional data burden be minimal, and we should have been collecting much of the really significant information all along. Secondly, the Indicators Report points only to the data that will be assembled. The real payoff in the model will probably be from the In-depth Accountability Studies envisioned by Strategic Planning Associates to address each of the accountability areas on a five-year cycle.[2]

---

[1]Chancellor's Office, California Community Colleges, *Accountability Indicators Report (Draft)*, February 1993.

[2]Strategic Planning Associates, *California Community College Accountability: State and Local Implementation Costs*, submitted to the California Community College Chancellor's Office, June, 1991, p. 29.

But a part of that initial critical reaction may be well founded. As we move from the discussion of an idea to its implementation, there is always the danger that a substantial transformation will take place. The pressures to measure what can easily be measured are always great.[3] The desire to avoid controversy and get on with the program are understandable. The result, however, is all too frequently an implementation that falls short of the goals of the original idea. To guard against this, those goals must rearticulated and refined at each stage of implementation. Definition and explication can never cease. It is in this spirit that we enter into a discussion that we hope will lead to a clearer understanding of accountability.

## Accountability Defined

The AB 1725 Accountability Task Force used the dictionary definition of "the condition of being held responsible for one's obligation." For higher education, two aspects seemed particularly important to the Task Force:

1. Specifying One's Obligation; and
2. Remaining Answerable for Meeting That Obligation.[4]

To the Task Force it appeared that accountability was primarily about specifying expectations and communicating evidence that those expectations have been met.[5] Nevertheless the documents of the accountability model give very short shrift to the specification of expectations and instead hurry on to the enumeration of indicators; that is, focusing almost exclusively on the communication of "evidence." We shall return to this point shortly.

On the question of whom we are responsible to, the Task Force finessed the issue a bit by outlining instead how the accountability model would be used. They anticipated that the model would be used to report system level accountability information to the State Legislature and other agencies and for policy development by the Board of Governors. They also assumed that local district boards and policy makers would look to this information to inform planning and budgeting. And, finally, they anticipated that districts and colleges would use the model to communicate with local constituencies about the institutions' performance.[6]

What we are responsible for is a bit of a mixed bag. Five "components" of the accountability system were spelled out by the Task Force:

---

[3]The draft indicators report provides ready examples of this: 12 tables on student access complete with preliminary figures versus 5 tables for student success of which only 2 have preliminary data and none of which actually attempt to measure learning. *Accountability Indicators Report (Draft)*, pp. 4-21.

[4]California Community Colleges AB 1725 Accountability Task Force, *AB 1725 Model Accountability System*, California Community Colleges, July, 1990, page 1.

[5]*Ibid.*

[6]*Ibid.*, page 4.

1. Student Access
2. Student Success,
3. Student Satisfaction,
4. Staff Composition, and
5. Fiscal Condition.[7]

This is a pretty list but ultimately not a very satisfying one. At least two omissions immediately come to mind. One would be whether our students are succeeding in the "right" programs as defined by employers and the economy's demand. A second would be whether our mix of programs fit the needs of our communities for economic development. Perhaps other measures could be added. But, in the absence of a clearer definition of accountability, there is no criteria for examining what should be included in the list and whether the "components" are of equal priority.

Precisely who is being held accountable, to whom are we responsible, what are we responsible for, and how will such responsibility be enforced? These questions must be extensively discussed and made clear. I will attempt to begin that discussion here not only to lay out the criteria from which the selection of accountability indicators might be critiqued, but even more importantly to breathe some life into accountability in the community colleges in general. Without a vigorous discussion among us about the who, whom, what and how of accountability, the model will become a dead letter and the collection of indicators will become another empty exercise in a long line of such exercises.

## Accountability a Relationship

The Task Force defined accountability as a condition. In a bit of a semantic game, let us redefine accountability as a relationship in order to call attention to the compass points of that condition. A person or institution is accountable ***to*** another ***for*** some behavior. A mechanism for the enforcement of this accountability is assumed--that is some form of ***power relationship*** or process to encourage the specified behavior exists. This suggests that we must simultaneously specify and understand ***who*** is accountable to ***whom*** for ***what,*** and ***how*** this accountability will be enforced.

**Whom**

It is perhaps easiest to list the *whom* of accountability. The Task Force saw this in terms of usage by state government, local district boards and policy makers and local constituencies. I would make the following list:

---

[7] *Ibid.*, page 3.

1. State government
2. Local district authorities
3. Students
4. Employers
5. Articulated institutions and programs
6. Each other

This list is by no means exhaustive, particularly in the sense that some of these groups could be subdivided in a number of ways. The list does indicate, however, that accountability is layered. It is actually a series of relationships. Each *whom* may involve a different *who, what* and *how*.

**Who**

The *who* follows from the *whom*, but they are not synonymous nor is there a one to one function. Multiple/overlapping levels abound. First of all, the state community college system as a whole is accountable to state elected officials, and this is a completely different accountability than that of each individual college or district for achieving state determined goals.

Let us take student equity as an example. It is quite conceivable that college-by-college a relatively good match could be found between the distribution ethnicity and other indicators of disadvantage among students and the population of the individual service areas, while statewide such proportions were substantially out of balance. This would result if heavily disadvantaged districts provide significantly lower rates of service, i.e. participation rates, than historically wealthier districts are able to maintain. No amount of local accountability for equity of student access would change this. The solution would lie in part in changes in the apportionment of funding at the state level to the individual institutions.[8]

When we think about statewide accountability, it also becomes evident that elected officials become a *who* as well as a *whom*. A true accountability model would be a double edged sword providing information which would enable voters to hold elected officials responsible for the performance of community colleges in the same way that administrators are responsible to elected leaders.

---

[8]We have examined this question elsewhere to some extent. See George Prather and Richard Pfefferman, *Put the Money Where the Needs Are: Inequality and the Funding of Growth in the California Community Colleges,* presented at the 1993 Annual Conference of the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, Granlibakken at Lake Tahoe, Los Angeles Community College District, April 1993. Those results reveal an even more complex layering of accountability than this hypothetical example suggests. Specifically, community colleges appear to do fairly well in providing equity of access, though better data may well reveal some problems to be addressed. But clearly the community college system does not overcome the substantial inequality of access to public higher education as a whole in California. In this case, the accountability relationship needs to be applied to the total system of public higher education.

The move from the role of *whom* to that of *who* is replayed at the local level. Trustees of individual districts hold administrators accountable and are in turn responsible to the local voters. A complete accountability model must provide information which gives meaning to both of these relationships as well.

A further short jump transforms an individual college's top administrators from a *who* into a *whom* as they use accountability information to hold sub-institutional units accountable. Indeed, accountability may only be meaningful when it can be taken to this programmatic level, where the levers which can alter outcomes actually exist.

At this level, horizontal as well as vertical accountability is revealed. Program units are simultaneously suppliers to other parallel units both within and outside the institution, and consumers of the services and students supplied by those other units. These also are accountability relationships, and a comprehensive model must meet these information needs as well.

This notion of horizontal as well as vertical accountability finally can (and should) be applied to individuals who actually engage in the behaviors which produce student outcomes. In the list of *whom* we are responsible to, "each other" was the final entry. Taking the horizontal accountability concept one step further (and in the process doing perhaps minor violence to the relationship metaphor), we might modify this last item to read "each other/ourselves." Ultimately, accountability may be enforced more by our own sense of standards and obligations and those we share with our colleagues than by any formal, vertical structures. I will return to the significance of this internal, individual accountability below. It is not inserted here, however, to suggest in any way that efforts to develop an accountability model which conveys significant information about performance are inconsequential.

**What**

I have already suggested that the *what* of accountability has been largely glossed over in the development of the model. No statements of expectations have been attempted in the documents prepared by the Task Force or others; only general references to state and locally unique missions have been made. At best, indicators have been put forward which would appear to point to particular expectations, but the relationships have been left unstated. I shall not really attempt to rectify this lack here, but one point can be raised which provides a basis for a critique of the five major components of the model system noted above.

This point is that ***outcomes***, not processes or intentions, must be the primary medium of exchange in an accountability system. Accountability needs to be seen as a variant of the reformation which is sweeping both public and private institutions under the guise of "reinventing government", "total quality management", etc. Common to all these reforms is the argument that our institutions have lost sight of the outcomes they were created to produce and the customers they were supposed to serve, and currently seek to be judged only on the basis of their methods or processes.

The Task Force components of Student Access, Student Success, Student Satisfaction, Staff Composition, and Fiscal Condition can be reappraised from this standpoint. Of these, only student success would appear to a truly first order outcome. Student access might be a second order item, but one which is meaningful only in tandem with student success. The other three are of a third order. Student satisfaction is perhaps a process variable or interim outcome measure, but one which is not central to the mission. As public agencies, staff composition has an independent importance but it is only a process variable in relation the central mission. Likewise with financial condition. Practically speaking, the state government of course wants to know our financial condition, but its real meaning is in relation to units of student success.

A second point flows from this brief analysis of the five components: goals, desired outcomes must be very clearly and specifically stated before indicators can be considered. Student Success provides one example. Success indicators must be normed on student goals and institutional mission--they must be selected and stated relative to the number of students pursuing the corresponding goal and the degree of importance of that goal to the institutional mission. Course and degree completion rates and transfer statistics are meaningless unrelated to a much more elaborate examination of expectations. They will, however, undoubtedly be the most frequently cited of the proposed indicators.

Student Access provides another example which allows us to explore even further the relationship of goals and mission to the selection of indicators. The first two draft indicators on student access propose to compare the distribution of ethnicity, gender and other characteristics of students with the distribution of those factors among the general population. Some of the preliminary figures, as shown below, suggest that we are not doing too bad a job. Hispanics appear to be somewhat underrepresented at 18% of students versus 26% of population, but the "majority" White population seems to be right at its appropriate mark among enrolled students.

## Student Access: Credit Enrollment Compared to Population

| Ethnicity | Number of Students | Percent | Population Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| White | 660,137 | 55 | 57 |
| Black | 90,332 | 8 | 7 |
| Hispanic | 211,651 | 18 | 26 |
| Asian | 126,824 | 11 | 9 |
| American Indian | 14,068 | 1 | 1 |
| Filipino | 38,224 | 3 | |
| Other | 16,738 | 1 | |
| No Response | 39,069 | 3 | |

(A portion of Table 1.11, *Accountability Indicators Report*, p. 4)

For some simple demographic reasons, however, these are not meaningful comparisons. Ethnicity and related access factors like limited English proficiency vary substantially by age. Census data from Los Angeles County shown below can illustrate the point, though the proportions of

Hispanics are significantly greater proportionally in Los Angeles County than statewide. Including those under 18 increases the Hispanic proportion of the population and decreases the White percent. Including those 55 and above would obviously have the opposite impact. But neither of these age groups contributes significantly to community college enrollment. On the other hand, the two youngest of the four remaining age groups contribute quite disproportionately to student enrollment. In the Los Angeles Community Colleges, 48% of headcount and 54% of student FTE is produced by the population 18 to 24. If statewide data were applied and students compared to that part of the population most likely to enroll, the probable conclusion would be that Hispanics are underrepresented by about 50% instead of a little over one fourth as suggested by the preliminary indicators.

## Age and Ethnicity

**Proportion of Population**

Los Angeles County, 1990 Census

| Ethnicity | Under 18 | 18-19 | 20-24 | 25-34 | 35-54 | 55 Plus | Total Population |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Black | 11.4 | 10.2 | 9.7 | 10.3 | 10.7 | 9.8 | 10.6 |
| Hispanic | 50.5 | 50.0 | 49.5 | 40.0 | 30.0 | 18.6 | 37.9 |
| Asian & Other | 10.7 | 11.3 | 9.8 | 10.7 | 12.4 | 9.4 | 10.8 |
| White | 27.4 | 28.5 | 31.0 | 39.0 | 46.9 | 62.2 | 40.8 |
| All Groups | 25.6 | 3.3 | 9.6 | 20.1 | 24.2 | 17.2 | 100.0 |

The issue is more complex still. Student goals, and thus institutional mission, are also related to age, with transfer and first job preparation being pursued by younger people, while general and continuing education are sought by older age groups. The extent to which an institution actually chooses some parts of the mission over others should be reflected in student demographics. Another way of putting this is that if one is allowed to define the appropriate population norm in terms of age and goal, one can move the "desired" ethnic distribution closer to or further away from that of enrolled students. And this is the way the game will be played by individual institutions unless we do the work of refining the norm group by operationalizing mission statements into tangible outcomes which can be assessed by objective indicators.

**How**

Indicators need to be derived from explicit statements about outcomes. This becomes even more clear when we examine the possible ***how*** of accountability, that is, how the information will be used to bring performance more in line with desired outcomes. Many may secretly hope that the information will not be used. Indicator reports will pile up in the same old way that data have in the past, but no mechanisms, sanctions or incentives will be created which move anyone to change.

Let us assume, at least for the moment, that the indicators will be used in some more sophisticated procedures to change behavior. What might those procedures look like? I cannot see that this question has been at all addressed in the present Accountability Model.

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in their book *Reinventing Government* draw a significant distinction between "mission-driven government" and "rule-driven organizations".[9] Rule-driven organizations have much of their activity prescribed and circumscribed by elaborate rules stating what will be done, how it will be done and what will not be done. The California Education Code comes immediately to mind. Mission-driven units, on the other hand, are asked to focus on the desired outcomes, and are left relatively free to internally devise the means for accomplishing those results. Rule-driven organizations, Osbborne and Gaebler would argue, can be evaluated only in the limited sense of "did they follow the rules?" Mission-driven government can be held much more fully accountable for what they accomplish, and given incentives or sanctions to do more. Rule-driven governments operate in a command and control environment. Mission-driven units are infused with an entrepreneurial spirit.

This distinction is an important one for us, as it points the way to how and how much we and our institutions will be transformed if accountability is taken seriously. Accountability can not be a simple vertical dynamic in which colleges and districts are commanded to produce better numbers as measured by the indicators. Both ends of the accountability relationship have power. Will a college which does not produce the desired number of transfers be shut down, its trustees replaced, its staff fired? We know those would be empty threats if applied on any significant scale. Ours are substantial institutions in each of our communities, and the demise of any one would produce a serious hole in the service system of any community.

More subtle mechanisms will have to be devised, mechanisms such as incentives that focus on outcomes and encourage entrepreneurial accomplishment instead of rule compliance. In such a system, indicators might well become powerful, even too powerful. Suppose that funding were based at least in part on an institution's indicators of student success, not just total enrollment. No doubt every college would rapidly install systems for measuring course and degree completion, job placement, etc. and would begin to pare programs which could not show that they made meaningful contributions to the success figures.

Put in these terms, it is clear that we must evaluate accountability indicators with great care, not only for their accuracy or quality but also for their weight. Do we really mean that with twelve indicators of student access, five for student success, five for staff composition, and two for fiscal condition, that access is as important as everything else combined? Or, is staff composition of equal importance to student success as a measure of institutional performance? Do we really want to say this openly that our institutions exist to provide employment? Obviously this is not the intent. But unless we consider *how* the indicators will be used as they are selected and refined, such unintended consequences will result.

---

[9]See particularly Chapter 4, "Mission-Driven Government: Transforming Rule-Driven Organizations, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1993.

The potential power of indicators to drive institutional behavior is great, perhaps too great for the state of the art. Indicators and incentives must be refined and weighted. Success, access and other variables must be combined in appropriate ways. As desired outcomes are specified, we may find that not all are equally measurable or perhaps not measurable at the entrepreneurial unit level where the application of incentives would produce different results.

Two points need to be stressed at present. First, at least currently, a mechanical model of accountability cannot be applied and perhaps can never be exclusively employed. Accountability needs to be understood as a change in institutional culture as much as the adoption of a model. Strategic Planning Associates spoke of it as a new paradigm.[10] But if anything, that is too mild a term. Our institutions need to be infused with a spirit of wanting to be accountable to our students, our publics and ourselves. Secondly, and in this spirit, we need a lot more study of accountability--of mission, of outcomes, of indicators, of incentives, etc.

## Let a Thousand Studies Bloom

The indicators report should go forward. This is probably about as good a draft as we can do at this point. One very specific but far reaching change needs to be made, however; that of how and to whom these indicators will be released. I would advocate as wide a distribution of the institutional array of each indicator as possible.

The report draft expresses a concern for "institutional privacy" as it were:

> Purely descriptive information that does not provide an opportunity for comparison has severely limited value for analytical, evaluative, and accountability purposes. The statewide indicators will be available as state averages and, where possible, as county averages. College and districts will receive their own individual reports, which can be compared to state and county benchmarks.
>
> The interpretation and release of local results should rest with the district....Only someone who is familiar with local conditions could appropriately interpret the results.[11]

This is a recipe which will cook accountability into a completely bland dish. It invites each institution to explain away any unpleasant figures in the same manner that high schools now render comprehensive test results meaningless.[12]

---

[10]Strategic Planning Associates, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[11] *Accountability Indicators Report, p 2.*

[12]I would anticipate, for example, that my CD-ROM and I could make quite a good, but less than honorable, living hiring out to institutions seeking to show that they were really doing a terrific job in providing student access, once the unique local conditions were appropriately understood.

Instead we need to plan for wide dissemination of the basic data which will make possible the equally wide analysis of this information. Only as we begin to see the patterns which these indicators reveal can we further refine the measurements and investigate the relationships to better appraise accountability, and, even more importantly, to begin to use this information to improve the delivery of educational services. In-depth accountability studies commissioned through the Chancellor's Office can only attempt a small part of this, and cannot be expected to capture the variety of perspectives which need to be brought to bear at this stage in the development of accountability.

Make the indicators available to anyone who can spell "spreadsheet." Provide them in DBase, Lotus 1-2-3 and Excel formats. Encourage every college to analyze the full array and to construct their own comparison group.[13] Let every doctoral candidate from within our institutions who can turn on a computer, transform the indicators into a dissertation on accountability. Plead that the statewide Academic Senate and the faculty organizations will create fellowships for those among them who would seek to analyze the indicators. Plan that the Community College League of California, the Research and Planning Group and any other of our statewide organizations will devote whole tracks at their annual meetings to the accountability debate.

Hopefully this brief outline of the ***who, whom, what*** and ***how*** of accountability will provide some framework, some guide to the unanswered questions of accountability. Clearly, anything short of the intensity of discussion I am advocating at this stage, will doom accountability to the dustbin of structural reform efforts, falling far short of the cultural revolution which is needed.

---

[13]The draft report proposes comparison by size of institution. This may make sense for the Fiscal Condition indicators where such groupings might capture comparable economies of scale. It is a meaningless comparison for all of the other indicators, however.